National Interagency Fuels Coordination Group

NATIONAL INTERAGENCY FIRE CENTER
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Topic: Wildland Fire and Air Quality

Issue: Federal Policy and Implementation

Background: The 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Policy and the 2001 update to that policy provide guidance to federal agencies concerning management of wildland fire on federal lands throughout the United States. These policy documents define three distinct types of wildland fire. These three types are:

> **Wildfire**. An unplanned, unwanted wildland fire, including unauthorized human-caused fires, escaped wildland fire use events, escaped prescribed fire projects and all other wildland fires where the objective is to put the fire out.
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> **Wildland Fire Use**. The application of the appropriate management response to naturally ignited wildland fires to accomplish specific resource management objectives in predefined designated areas outlined in Fire Management Plans.
>
> **Prescribed Fire**. Any fire ignited by management actions to meet specific objectives. A written, approved prescribed fire plan must exist, and NEPA requirements (where applicable) must be met, prior to ignition.

These policy statements provide a clear demarcation between prescribed fire and two types of unplanned ignitions (wildfire and wildland fire use). Both **wildfire** and **wildland fire use** are emergency responses. **Wildfire** requires a Wildland Fire Situation Analysis (WFSA) to determine the appropriate management response while **wildland fire use** requires a Wildland Fire Implementation Plan (WFIP) to determine the appropriate management response. Both planning processes are accomplished in compressed timeframes in order to meet overriding objectives of public and firefighter safety and protection of natural and human-made resources. For a wildfire the WFSA determines the suppression response based on public and firefighter safety and trade-offs between cost and potential damage to values at risk. For wildland fire use the WFIP determines the response based on those same factors but also consider very broad potential benefits which may accrue due to the fire (hazard fuel reduction and restoration of natural processes).

Prescribed fire is distinguished from **wildfire** and **wildland fire use** because it is discretionary and is ignited at a time, place, and under weather and fuel conditions which have been determined to meet specific resource management objectives.

Key Points Related to Air Quality:

Prescribed fires are planned and implemented to meet specific resource management objectives. The specific location, timing, and method of ignition are prescribed to meet those objectives and are included in the Prescribed Fire Plan used by Federal agencies. The plan defines a range of measurable conditions during which a prescribed fire may be ignited and held (managed) as a prescribed fire. It also identifies smoke management concerns such as meteorology and fuel moisture which can be factored into the timing of ignitions to ensure compliance with federal, state, and local smoke management regulations.

Wildfires and **wildland fire use** are both managed with the primary objective of providing for firefighter and public safety. After that objective is ensured, wildfires are managed to minimize damage and cost of suppression. Wildland fire use allows managers to consider a wide variety of benefits (restoration of natural processes, hazard fuel reduction, etc.) of unplanned ignitions in assessing trade-offs between cost of suppressing the fire and resource benefits the fire may produce. In both cases, impacts to air quality are considered in determining the strategy and tactics for management. Tactical ignitions can be used to mitigate threats to firefighter and public safety and resources. However, because the timing and location of the ignitions are a response to the current and predicted situation, the ability to avoid air quality impacts is more limited than in prescribed fire operations.

Wildland Fire Use reduces fuel accumulations which could otherwise contribute to significant air quality impacts. Wildland fire use is not the same as the historical term "prescribed natural fire." Wildland fire use follows planning and operational guidelines previously not established under the prescribed natural fire program. Wildland Fire Use fires can burn for long durations in a variety of weather and fuel conditions. Managing these fires requires periodic (often daily) review of resource impacts to ensure management objectives are being met. Trigger points for management action are established and can include impacts of smoke to air quality. Mitigation measures are often used to manage air quality impacts including tactical ignition to reduce impacts and duration of smoke. If a fire exceeds acceptable resource impacts including air quality, it can be converted to a wildfire and the appropriate suppression response will be taken. Once a Wildland Fire Use Fire is converted to a wildfire it will always be designated as a wildfire. Wildland Fire Use can only be applied in predefined designated areas outlined in Fire Management Plans. These areas are not limited to Parks and Wilderness Areas.

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